Ismahan Levi responds to Wissam Nasr's 2nd message

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Dear Dr Sina,

Your response to Mr Nasr's arguments has demonstrated the weakness of quoting from the one source and disproven those he's raised. Mr Nasr places a lot of faith in the one source but I daresay there are several other equally authoritative sources with diametrically opposing views to those he cites as, dare I say it, gospel.

In response to the allegation of the divine origin of the Quran, I provide the views of the following authorities:

Arthur Jeffery, “The Foreign Vocabulary of the Quran”:

Emphasis has been placed in recent years on the too long forgotten fact that Arabia at the time of Muhammad was not isolated from the rest of the world, as Muslim authors would have us believe. There was at that time, as indeed for long before, full and constant contact with the surrounding peoples of Syria, Persia, and Abyssinia, and through intercourse there was a natural interchange of vocabulary. Where the Arabs came in contact with higher religion and higher civilisation, they borrowed religious and cultural terms. This fact was fully recognised by the earliest circle of Muslim exegetes, who show no hesitation in noting words as of Jewish, Christian, or Iranian origin. Later, under the influence of the great divines, especially as ash-Shafi'i, this was pushed into the background, and an orthodox doctrine was elaborated to the effect that the Quran was a unique production of the Arabic language. The modern Muslim savant, indeed, is, as a rule, seriously distressed by any discussion of the foreign origin of words in the Quran.

He continues:

One of the few distinct impression gleaned from a first perusal of the bewildering confusion of the Quran, is that of the amount of material therein which is borrowed from the great religions that were active in Arabia at the time when the Quran was in process of formation. From the fact that Muhammad was an Arab, brought up in the midst of Arabian paganism and practicing its rites himself until well on into manhood, one would naturally have expected to find that Islam had its roots deep down in this old Arabian paganism. It comes, therefore, as no little surprise, to find how little of the religious life of this Arabian paganism is reflected in the pages of the Quran. ... it is plain that Muhammad drew his inspiration not from the religious life and experiences of his own land and his own people, but from the great monotheistic religions which were pressing down into Arabia in his day.

In regard to Muhammad's pagan practices referred to above he states, “Convincing proof

of this is found in the statement of the Prophet quoted in Yaqut, Mu'jam, iii, 664, to the effect that on a certain occasion he sacrificed a ewe to Uzza, which he excuses on the ground that at that time he was following the religion of his people."

Ali Dashti in "23 Years: A Study of the Prophetic Career of Mohammad":

"A process of this kind had begun in Mohammad's mind during his childhood and had prompted him to meet and talk with Christian monks and priests on his Syrian journey instead of spending all his time on commercial business. On his way back, through the lands of Medyan and the Ad and Thamud, he had heard the legends of the local people. In Mecca itself he had exchanged visits with followers of the scriptural religions. He had sat for hours in Jabr's shop near the hill of Marwa, and had been in constant touch with Khadija's cousin Waraqa b. Nawfal, who is said to have translated a part of the New Testament into Arabic. All these experiences are likely to have turned the ever-present disquiet in his inner mind into turmoil. There is a reference in the Koran to Mohammad's long and frequent talks with Jabr. The Qorayshites alleged that Mohammad had learned the words of the Koran from Jabr, who was a foreigner. The answer is given in verse 105 of sura 16 (on-Nalh): "And We know that they say, "It is only a human who is teaching him." The speech of the person at whom they hint is outlandish whereas this is clear Arabic speech." The biographies of the Prophet mention several other followers of the scriptures and possessors of knowledge with whom he exchanged visits before the start of his mission, e.g. Aesh, the sage of the Howayteb tribe, Salman ol-Farsi, and Belal the Abyssinian. Abu Bakr also had discussions with him at that time and agreed with him."

I cannot but cite a little-known publication on the subject of Islam. This from The Encyclopaedia Britannica:

"Thus the Quran often gives the impression of having been produced by a rather haphazard method of composition, an impression that is further heightened by the fact that certain favourite phrases such as "but God is forgiving, compassionate," "God is knowing, wise," "most of them know nothing", often have little or no apparent connection with the immediate context. In fact, some sceptics claim that these additions served only to produce a needed rhyme. ... Also the vocabulary of the Quran is overwhelmingly of Arabic origin, but there are, nevertheless, borrowed words, mostly from Hebrew and Syriac, bearing witness to Muhammad's debt to Judaism and Christianity. These loan words are primarily technical terms such as injil, "gospel", (Greek evangelion); taurat, "the law", or "Torah", of Judaism, Iblis, "the Devil" (Greek diabolos); or translations or adaptations of theological terms such as amana, "to believe" (Hebrew or Aramaic); salat, "prayer" (probably Syriac). Such explanations are usually regarded with suspicion by Muslims, since orthodox doctrine holds that the language of the Quran is the purest Arabic."

It continues, "Western Scholars who have analysed the contents of the various revelation have shown that much of the narrative material concerning biblical persona and events differs from the biblical account and seems to have come from later Christian and above all, from Jewish sources, (e.g. Midrash). Other motifs, such as the idea of the impending judgment and the descriptions of paradise agree with standard topics in the missionary preaching of the contemporary Syriac church fathers. The dependence need not, however, be of a literary kind, but might be due to influence from oral traditions."

To use Mr Nasr's succinctly stated remark, “if you have any problem with what is said, ... take it up with (the authorities cited above).”

Mr Nasr makes much of the authenticity of the Quran. It begs the question, if this is so, what does Mr Nasr make of Puin's findings re the Sana'a Quran and its historicity? What of the allegation that the sun sets in a murky pool? Allegory? Poetry? And what of meteors being used as missiles against jinns? Does this mean meteor showers are aimed at jinns who obligingly line up to be struck? What of Muhammad's miraj? Did he travel through the seven heavens wherever those might be? A different dimension, perhaps? To have a very earthy conversation with Moses as to how to influence Allah's judgement on the number of times Muslims need to pray every day? Allegory again? The delusions of a psychopathically disturbed individual, perhaps? It is interesting that Mr Nasr glosses over this subject and returns to the ad hominem attacks at this juncture.

To prove the existence of jinns, Mr Nasr refers to an incident which allegedly occurred at Creedmore Psychiatric Hospital, New York. If this incident constitutes the basis for proof, surely then, by the same logic, Mr Nasr must accept the “proof” of reincarnation based on the article published by Professor Ian Stevenson, “Twenty Cases Indicative of Reincarnation”, published in 1966, and the incidence of birthmarks on alleged reincarnates situated where fatal wounds were sustained in a previous life, as Guy Playfair notes in his book, “The Flying Cow”. This may fly in the face of Islamic philosophy but, in keeping with Mr Nasr's definition of proof, must constitute that of reincarnation.

Mr Nasr elsewhere implies that Islam and science are not incompatible. In relation to the flat earth argument, he quotes Esposito on Al Farghani. Permit me to demonstrate why I stated earlier that it is a weakness to quote from the one source. As my champion I take the late Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia who declared apostate via a fatwa anyone who claimed the earth to be round after studying what the Quran had to say on the subject. He later recanted this position after worldly Muslims, demonstrating no little embarrassment, prevailed upon him to do so. Mr Nasr states time and again a fatwa is an opinion and isn't as binding on Muslims as the pope's statements. There are two points to be made here. Firstly, one doesn't become the grand mufti of anywhere, leave alone Saudi Arabia, without being recognised as an authority on the Quran and Islam. Furthermore, Baz, my knight in shining armour, studied the Quran's statements on the flat earth theory before declaring his fatwa. It begs the question: what did he see in the Quran which brought him to that particular conclusion? Secondly, the pope's statements are not binding upon Christians unless they're made ex cathedra - a fatwa, of sorts. A rather disturbing parallel, to my mind.

To further counter Mr Nasr's claim on the compatibility of science and religion, I draw attention to a lecture by Richard Dawkins, published in The Nullifidian of Dec 94, wherein he debated Dr John Habgood on the existence of god and, in so doing, made very plain the alleged synergy between religion and science is non-existent. Professor Dawkins was educated at Oxford University and has taught zoology at the universities of California and Oxford. He is the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. I daresay he may be quoted as an authority. I strongly urge a reading of his books for an understanding of how religion and evolution are mutually incompatible.

Mr Nasr persists in stating that Islam spread through peaceful means despite being shown the views of Danielou, Durant, and Gautier. Again, these individuals are not completely unknown in their field of study and may be safely said to be authorities.

If memory serves me right, Mr Nasr rhetorically asks which leader forgave his assassin. From the secular world, Gandhi and Nathuram Vinayak Godse come to mind immediately. From the religious sources, Yeshu'a the Nazarene allegedly asked forgiveness from his deity for those who crucified him, as allegedly did several leaders and deities of the mystery religions.

One may continue in this manner but I submit that the point has been made. To quote from the one source, and an evidently biased one at that, diminishes an argument. I wonder if Mr Nasr would care to cite Warnsbrough, Jeffrey, Cooke, et al. Furthermore, to make ad hominem attacks isn't becoming and does no one any favour. As an ex-teacher of writing, if my memory hasn't deserted me completely, Mr Nasr will undoubtedly be aware of the difference in the usage of the words "of" and "off", in using the word "which" in regard to persons, and so forth. I suggest none of us is perfect in anything, grammar included. It behoves us, then, to attempt to glean the subject matter discussed and disregard as much as is required the vocabulary and grammar used to convey the message.

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